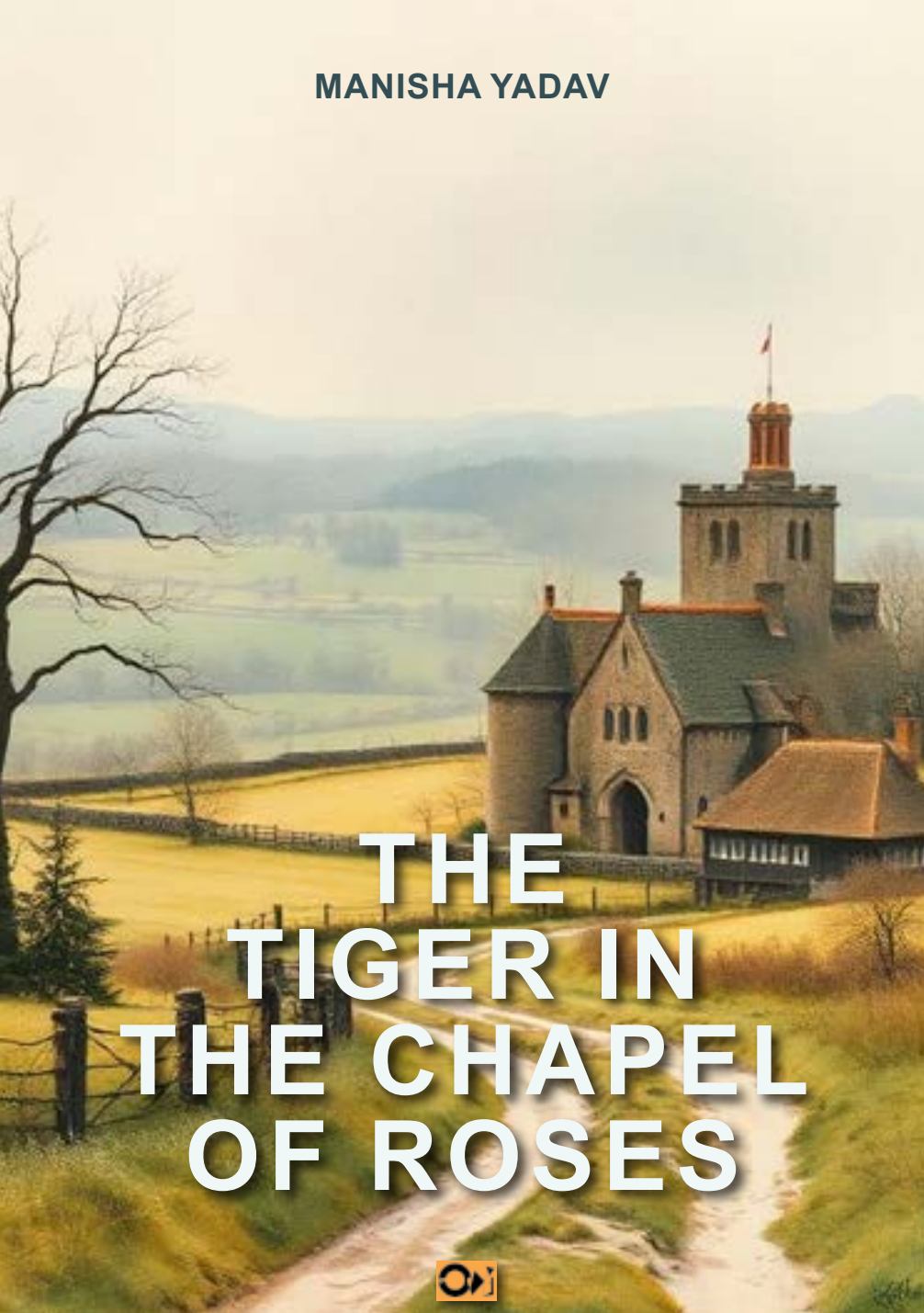
MANISHA YADAV



THE TIGER IN THE CHAPEL OF ROSES

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It was near evening when the cloisters began to empty. The priory's bell tolled low, heavy in the smoky air of May, and the shadows inside the stone corridors deepened like spilled ink. Soldiers wandered among the walled gardens, laughing too loudly, sword belts clinking against armour ill-fitted to the task of war. One youth, little more than a boy, ran his blade down a hedge, shearing fresh leaves until a steward barked at him. The war was here. And it was coming for all of them.

Queen Margaret stood alone by the chapel window, watching. Her fingers, delicate and ringed, clutched at the carved stone like claws on prey. Below her, the banners of the House of Lancaster flapped in nervous rhythm. She did not blink.

"Curses on this place," she whispered. "Even the wind stinks of treachery."

A rustle behind her. She turned with venom ready but it was only Sir Robert Wydville, removing his gauntlets, his cloak damp with sweat.

"Your Grace," he said, bowing, "the scouts report the Yorkist host is camped a mere two miles north, behind the woods. Warwick leads. Edward with him."

"Edward," she spat. "That boy. That bastard... no king's blood in his veins, only mischief and vanity. He preens for the people like an actor in rags. A butcher's apprentice in mail."

Sir Robert remained still, jaw set.

"They'll attack with the morning light," he said. "We still hold the town. We could fortify the western road. Or fall back."

"No." She stepped past him. "I did not come to St

Albans to run. I came to bury my enemies beneath its stones."

At that, she swept down the hall, her red gown whispering like a flame over flagstones. Sir Robert followed reluctantly, pulling his gloves back on. The Queen had not slept in three days. Nor smiled. Her chambers had become a map room, a war-den. And the prayers she offered were not to God but to the memory of vengeance, against York, against the soft courtlings who whispered of compromise, against the King himself.

Ah, King Henry. Her husband, her burden.

* * * * *

She found him seated in the abbey's sanctuary, alone, eyes fixed on the high stained glass. King Henry VI, the pious child-king turned gentle man, his mind cracked by too many years of uncertainty.

He didn't turn when she entered.

"My lord," she said sharply. "Do you pray for peace?"

"I pray for God's will," he murmured. "Though I do not understand it."

Margaret stiffened. “Then I shall make His will plain. Tomorrow we crush the serpent’s brood. York dies. Warwick dies. And you will stand in triumph, or not at all.”

Henry’s lips trembled. “Is there no other way?”

“No!” she snapped, voice rising and echoing through the empty nave. “They’ve made war upon the crown. They would drag our son from his cradle and put a puppet on the throne. I see it when I close my eyes. Edward, his flaxen hair matted with my child’s blood, smiling.”

He looked at her, at last.

“You are not well, Margaret.”

“No,” she agreed coldly. “I am not. I am *awake*.”

* * * * *

That night the camp was quiet. Margaret refused meat. She sat by torchlight in her tent, sharpening a dagger with short, deliberate strokes. Outside, the guard murmured about the sky, how the moon hung red behind a veil of mist. Superstition thickened the air like incense.

Then a messenger came running, breathless.

"They've moved, Your Grace! The Yorkist host, they're advancing under cover of night!"

She stood in one motion.

"Arm me," she said. "I will see the sunrise painted in their blood."

* * * * *

The first clash was chaos. St Albans' narrow streets became chutes of slaughter. York's men had burst in from the woods before dawn, slipping past sentries, and the bells were ringing before steel kissed steel.

Margaret rode through the smoke, her sword drawn. She was not armored like a knight, but her red cloak fluttered behind her like the banner of war itself.

"Push them back!" she shouted, eyes wide. "For your King! For Prince Edward!"

A soldier stumbled beside her, face half-caved by a mace. Arrows whistled overhead. A burning cart blocked the lane. She turned her horse and saw Wy-

dville shouting orders, dragging his wounded to a crumbling chapel wall.

"My Queen!" he cried. "They're cutting through from the east; we must fall back to the square!"

"We do not fall," she hissed. "We *fight*!"

But the words were drowned by the sound, a massive crash, timbers shattering as the Yorkist vanguard stormed the west gate. They bore no mercy. Warwick's banner, black bear and ragged staff, rose like a curse.

Margaret's horse screamed as an arrow struck its haunch. She was thrown, hitting the stones hard, vision cracking. Someone grabbed her, pulling her under a fallen arch. She tasted blood.

"Your Grace!" Wydville again. He held her steady. "We must run. Now."

"No," she moaned. "They're here. They've come for *me*."

She pushed free, stumbling to her feet.

"I will not be taken. Never again."

From the shadows came a figure, no heraldry, no colour but steel. He raised a sword.

Wydville lunged but was cut down in a single stroke.

The man turned to her. Beneath his helm, a young face. Beautiful. Pitiless.

"Edward," she whispered.

He said nothing.

She raised her dagger.

"*Come then,*" she snarled. "Let's finish this."

He stepped forward.

And the chapel fell into silence.

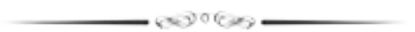
* * * * *

Later, no one could say exactly when or where she died. Some claimed they found her body beside Wydville, unmoving, with the dagger still in hand. Others swore she escaped in a friar's robe, weeping blood. Warwick denied ever seeing her. King Henry, when told, asked only if she had gone to heaven.

It was not a clean victory. Nothing in that war was.

But the stones of St Albans remembered. And in the winter, mothers whispered of the red queen who became a tiger, hunted in her own house, and died with her teeth bared to the stars.

THE END



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MANISHA YADAV

Manisha Devi. A California mom of two whirlwind daughters, spends her days dodging Lego bricks and deciphering the intricate social dramas unfolding at the park. Fueled by caffeine and a healthy dose of cynicism, she channels her observations into witty short stories about the eccentric characters she encounters in her daily life, from the overly-enthusiastic dog walker to the woman who whispers secrets to her bonsai tree.

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